Marek BANKOWICZ
Institute of Political Science and International Relations

ITALIAN DILEMMAS: HISTORY AND IDENTITY

"We built Italy, and now we must build Italians,"[1] said Camillo Cavour, the first Prime Minister of Italy, a state that unified as late as 1861. The crowning moment of the unification was the liquidation of the Papal States when Italian forces entered Rome on 20th September 1870. This idea – which is believed by many to be true even today, who subscribe to the argument that Italians still have to be built – is a perfect expression of the problem of Italian identity – or rather, the problem of the lack of it. Once unification had been achieved, Italy appeared on the political map of Europe as a fairly large state. Yet from its earliest days, the Italian state faced a major obstacle: the lack of historical tradition as a basis on which to build the *ethos* of the State. For before the 19th century there had been no form of statehood on the peninsula. The newly established state therefore was an entirely new phenomenon, with no history, tradition or common values and culture. The problem of a non-existent Italian nation was even worse, as it was expected to crystallise around the unified state. The founders of Italy believed the new state would build the nation; and in order to perform this task, the state was forced to restrain and discipline various particular and regional interests. An Italian was primarily to be an Italian, and not a Roman, Genoese, Milanese, Piedmontese, Venetian, Tuscan or Sicilian.

"The young Sabaudian monarchy," wrote Simona Colarizi, an Italian historian, "lying on the fringe of the Olympus of the powers that be, assumed the physiognomy of a liberal state on the road to democracy: there could be no other way. Liberals and democrats were those Italians who fought for the birth of the state, and it was on the liberal values that its institutional constitution was based."[2] Italy was the work of the *Risorgimento*: a major 19th century ideological and political movement that aimed at the unification of territories inhabited by Italians into a single state. The establishment of the new state was based on the political structures and institutions of

[1] Wielka Internetowa Encyklopedia Multimedialna, at <http://www.onet.pl>.

[2] S. Colarizi, *Storia del Novecento italiano*, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano 2000, p. 6.

the Kingdom of Sardinia–Piedmont, which made the postulates of the *Risorgimento* its official political programme. Yet the goals of the *Risorgimento* went beyond purely political matters: they also wanted to swiftly achieve a modern and progressive society in Italy. Unfortunately, to quote Stanley G. Payne, "after 1860 much of this task was put off indefinitely, while many patriots considered the new Italian system – oligarchic, elitist, and economically tight – a pathetic decay or betrayal of high aspirations."[3] The Italian State was dominated by an elite composed of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy of the North, which disregarded and held in contempt the poor southern part of the country. Constitutional monarchy was unacceptable for the republican faction, whose great political and intellectual leader, Giuseppe Mazzini was forced to emigrate. A fairly tight system of power, which lasted until the First World War, was developed, with only by those who could meet the high censuses being granted election rights. The country's economy was weak, and despite an acceleration in the process of industrialisation in the 1890s, Italy right up to the First World War remained a predominantly agricultural country, much poorer than other West European states.

The problems related to the lack of common national identity among the inhabitants of the young state were quick to surface. Many of them were only, in the words of Colarizi, "Italians on paper,"[4] as they felt no marked change in their social and political status, treating Italy with the same indifference that they exhibited towards Habsburg, Bourbon or papal rule. National culture was being born in pain. Moreover, the scope of its impact was highly limited. This was caused partly by the high level of illiteracy (in 1881, 67% Italians were illiterate) and partly by the lack of a common language. Many inhabitants did not speak Italian but a variety of dialects, while so-called "high society," the royal family included, spoke French. It is generally believed that Italian was not established as a commonly used language until the 1960s, when the unification occurred thanks to the television.

Several attempts were made to construct a colonial empire in order to make up for the lack of success in internal policy, yet even these plans failed. France beat Italy when it came to subjugating Tunisia in 1881. Italy only managed to found two small colonies in Eritrea and Somalia. An attempt to subjugate Ethiopia ended in a humiliating defeat at Adua (1896) – the only victory of African troops against a European army in the 19th century. "As a consequence," as S.G. Payne has noted, "Italy could not become Europe's 'sixth power,' and was left with the role of a country similar to Spain, Greece or Portugal, only slightly larger."[5] The general mood improved a little after victory was achieved in the Turkish war (1911–1912) which gave Italy Libya and several islands in the Aegean Sea.

In May 1915, Italy joined the Entente in the First World War, and benefited from the conflict: the Paris peace conference gave Italy Trento, Trieste, Upper Adige,

[3] S.G. Payne, *Il fascismo*, Newton & Compton Editori, Roma 1999, p. 69.

[4] S. Colarizi, *Storia del…*, p. 6.

[5] Ibid.

Istria and Dalmatia all of which had previously been under Austro–Hungarian rule. Consequently, the war effectively became the next stage of the *Risorgimento* – territories were acquired that were believed to be Italian. Nevertheless, Italy did not receive Fiume (Rijeka), which led to resentment throughout the country and withdrawal from the Peace conference.

In 1919, the Italian political stage saw the appearance of the fascist movement led by a former socialist, Benito Mussolini who adeptly capitalised on the frustration in society caused by hard economic conditions and the less than satisfactory results of the war. It was commonly believed that the Italian victory was "crippled" (*vittoria mutilata*). Fascism quickly spread. After the March on Rome (28 October 1922), the fascists seized power, and Mussolini assumed the post of the Prime Minister. The triumph of fascism ended the liberal period in the Italian history, which had begun with the establishment of the state. Now the State abruptly entered a new era.

The first years of Mussolini's government turned the state into a peculiar kind of semi-dictatorship. The Prime Minister led a multi-party government, with only three other fascist ministers. The new cabinet did not seem very different from its predecessors. New qualities, however, were beginning to appear. In November 1922, the Parliament granted Mussolini the right to rule by decree for a year, in order for it to tackle the country's economic problems. A month later, the Fascist Grand Council (*Gran Consiglio del Fascismo*) was established; formally, it was the managing body of the fascist party, yet the Council's prerogatives went much further. The Council began to influence directly the policy of the state, and in 1928 it became an official organ of the state and eclipsed the parliament. In January 1923, the party's *squadri* were turned into a voluntary national security militia (*Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*), which became a state institution. Mussolini's government achieved some economic and social successes, and was especially praised for bringing peace to the country. Little wonder that its authority was on the rise, and the National Fascist Party (*Partito Nazionale Fascista* – PNF) enrolled new members by the thousands. Towards the end of 1923, the Fascist Party had nearly 800,000 members. Twelve years later its membership rose to 2.7 million, and reached 3.6 million in 1941.

A major crises followed the kidnap and then the murder of a socialist MP, Giacomo Matteotti, by fascist thugs on 10th June 1924. The connections of Matteotti's killers with high- ranking government officials were disclosed. Even though the personal involvement of Mussolini has never been proved, he was definitely responsible for it politically. This is what the outraged general public believed, as it turned away from the head of the government. Opposition MPs withdrew from the workings of the parliament and, following the example of the Roman plebeians from the 5th century BC, announced an "Aventine secession." Fascists found themselves on the defensive, and Mussolini himself believed that he might be dismissed. As with 1922, the final decision was up to the King. Yet, despite the obvious advantages, the politically apathetic Vittorio Emanuele III decided not to intervene again.

After some time had passed, and now convinced that he was no longer in jeopardy, Mussolini launched his counteroffensive. On 3rd January 1925 he delivered his

famous address to the Parliament, announcing a sudden political turn. Twenty-six months after the March on Rome, Mussolini proclaimed "complete power for complete fascism," which was tantamount to transforming Italy into a full-fledged dictatorship. What is more, he assumed personal responsibility for the Matteotti murder, speaking swaggeringly that "if fascism has become a criminal association, then I am the leader of this criminal association."[6] For the first time, the police was ordered to arrest a group of political opponents, and opposition MPs who attempted to return to the Parliament.

Soon, the role of the Parliament was reduced only to approving governmental decrees. In the election of 1929, the voters received only one list, which they could support or reject. The electorate chose to support it by over 98%. A decade later the parliament was dissolved, and thereafter its function of political representation was assumed by the nominated Chamber of Fasces and Corporations (*Camera dei Fasci e delle Corporazioni*). Mussolini had managed to concentrate a vast amount of power in his hands. In addiction to being the Prime Minister, he presided over eight departments. He became *Il Duce* – the infallible leader of fascism and Italy. The slogans: "The Duce is always right" (*Il Duce ha sempre ragione*) and "To believe, to obey, to fight" (*Credere, obbedire, combattere*) became official slogans. Both the legal and education systems were fully fascistised. In 1926, after three unsuccessful attempts on Mussolini's life (in one of them he suffered a slight nose wound), all political parties apart from the PNF and all non-fascist trade unions were declared to be illegal.

The Duce announced that the Italian state was totalitarian (*stato totalitario*). The fundamental principle of such a state was "nothing against the State, nothing outside the State, nothing without the State."[7] A leading fascist philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, wrote that "for fascism, everything is in the state, and nothing human or spiritual may exist or have any value outside the state. In this sense, fascism is totalitarian, and a fascist state provides the synthesis and unity of all the values: it shapes, realizes, and develops the entire life of the nation."[8] Fascism thus primarily attempted the consolidation of the state, and then placing it on a pedestal. While it remained true that the nation and national identity were important, they could develop only within the framework of the totalitarian state. The omnipotent state referred to the ideas of national solidarity and tolerated no political, social, class or professional conflict, hence the establishment of the corporations that became its basic structure. Those accused of anti-state and subversive activity faced a special tribunal, whose decisions were secret and severe, especially after the reintroduction of capital punishment in 1927.

The totalitarian concept of the state was combined with the quest for a new, powerful national identity for Italians. The tradition of ancient Rome became a great

6 Quoted in S.G. Payne, *Il fascismo*, p. 126.

7 Quoted in K.D. Bracher, 'Totalitarismo' in *Enciclopedia del Novecento*, Roma 1984, Vol. 7, p. 721.

8 G. Gentile, *Che cosa è il fascismo*, La Fenice, Firenze 1925, p. 37.

myth that was to support the national identity. The Italian nation was announced as being the inheritor and continuator of the Romans, and if this was so, greatness and grandeur had to be its appointed fate, therefore the nation had to strive to develop its own empire. "Latinity," wrote P. Viola, "became something akin to a civil religion, whose task was to reinforce the efforts of the Italians to regain the greatness that was their due."[9] The moment the fascists assumed control over the country was considered to be the beginning of the new era: the Fascist era (*era fascista*).

In 1933, Germany fell under the sway of Adolf Hitler, who had always had a great deal of respect for Mussolini and considered the Duce to be his political master. Mussolini was gradually warming to Hitler. But during the 1920s he refused to send Hitler his autographed photo, and later – in private circles – frequently referred to German Nazism as a "parody of fascism." In the second half of the 1930s the Duce was forced to come to terms with Hitler, especially as the dynamics of the Third Reich greatly exceeded the capacity of Italy. The two countries under two variations of fascism inexorably converged. Yet it was during this period that Mussolini sadly found himself being steadily reduced to the position of *dictator minor*, as the role of the *dictator maior* was reserved for the German *Führer*. In 1938, under the influence of Hitler, Mussolini announced the concept of "Italian racism," which was accompanied by the introduction of anti-Jewish legislation.

Envying the German conquests, while he himself could boast only of conquering Ethiopia (and not without great effort) in 1936, and eager to participate, together with Germany, in the new division of the world in the spirit of the imperial tradition of ancient Rome, Mussolini took Italy into the Second World War in June 1940. While Italian soldiers had fought bravely during the First World War, they now displayed complete military ineptitude and a lack of commitment to Mussolini's war, which they did not consider to be their own. For this reason Italy's military involvement was a long succession of defeats: a fact that shook the fascist regime and served to undermine the Duce's authority. On 25 July 1943, the Fascist Grand Council resolved to strip Mussolini of his power. Following this change, King Vittorio Emanuele III had him arrested and the post of the Prime Minister was entrusted to Marshal Pietro Badoglio, whose government opened negotiations with the Allies and later declared war on Germany. Confined to the mountain resort of Gran Sasso in the Apennines, Mussolini was rescued only after German troops, operating on Hitler's personal order and commanded by Colonel Otto Skorzenny, launched a spectacular raid. After the Duce had been brought to Germany, on 17 September 1943, fulfilling Hitler's orders, he announced on Munich radio the dethronement of the Sabaudian dynasty and the establishment of the Italian Social Republic (*Repubblica Sociale Italiana*). Fully under German control, this bantam puppet state with its capital in the town of Salò situated over Garda Lake, in the northern part of Italy was controlled by German troops. Italian fascism was now returning to its republican roots which was to be reflected in the new name of the party: the Fascist Republican Party (*Partito*

[9] P. Viola, *Il Novecento*, Einaudi, Torino 2000, p. 96.

Fascista Repubblicano – PFR). During this period Mussolini returned to highly leftist slogans, which advocated the "socialisation of the economy," although an attempt to do so in the Salò Republic was forestalled by the Germans.

The history of the Salò Republic turned out to be an episode of less than two years. Towards the end of April 1945, when Germany's defeat was inevitable, Mussolini – escorted by an SS squad – attempted to flee to Switzerland. On 27 April, the column was stopped at Dongo, close to the Swiss border by the Italian partisans. Dressed in the uniform of a German officer, Mussolini was identified and arrested. The next day, the Duce was executed at Como together with his long-time mistress, Claretta Petacci, who chose to die by his side. On 29 April, their bodies, hanging by their feet, were publicly displayed in Piazzale Loreto in Milan. This kind of macabre spectacle was a fascist invention: they had done the same thing in the recent past with the bodies of captured partisans. Now came the time for revenge.

The end of the Italian dictator was a tragic one, yet so was the fate he had prepared for his nation, depriving it of freedom for many long years and forcing it to endure the anguish of war. Mussolini's mistake was not to have copied his Spanish protégé, General Francisco Franco, who – because he was capable of saying "no" to Hitler – not only survived the war unscathed but also managed to remain in power for the next three decades, not unlike another disciple of the Duce, António Salazar in Portugal.

Fascism made its mark not only on the Italian state but also on the entire Italian national conscience, which it distorted through its manipulations. An eminent Italian philosopher of a liberal predisposition, Benedetto Croce (who for a time was also fascinated with fascism, as he believed it to have some points in common with liberalism) expressed a highly controversial opinion while speaking in front of the Legislative Assembly in September 1945: "From 1860 to 1922, Italy was one of the most democratic countries of the world, while its development was a non-ruptured and generally swift advance along the path to democracy, naturally there is talk here of democracy with a liberal style, as each true democracy is."[10] Thus Croce expected that the post-war Italian state would be a simple continuation of pre-1922 Italy, and considered the fascist period as an interruption of the natural historical continuity – a certain ellipsis in the history of the country. Disregarding the opinion that pre-fascist Italy was a blooming democracy, a theory that the facts do not support, Croce was mistaken in two matters. Firstly, in suggesting that fascism was an episode of little consequence and a taxing historical blunder whose experience could be fairly easily overcome; and secondly, his view that Italy must bridge the gap between the pre-fascist period and the post-fascist future – something which would be impossible to accomplish as post-war Italy had to become an entirely new political entity. The formula of a liberal pre-1922 state was strongly discredited. There was a rather common opinion that the helplessness and errors of the liberal system as well as its misalignment to the real needs of the nation had provided a fertile environment for

[10] Quoted in P. Alatri, *Le origini del fascismo*, Editori Laterza, Roma 1956, p. 163.

the rise of fascism. After the war, Italy thus had to take shape following a double negation: rejecting both fascism and the model of the state that preceded it.

In the referendum of 2 June 1946, Italian citizens voted against the continuation of the monarchy, and instead opted for the establishment of a republic. At the same time, elections to the Constitutional National Assembly, a body that was to write the constitution for the new republic, were held. Three parties, namely Christian Democracy (*Democrazia Cristiana* – DC), the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano* – PCI), and the Italian Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Italiano* – PSI), obtained together nearly 75% of votes. For many years, until the late 1980s, these three parties were to be the leading actors of the country's political stage and they decisively influenced the face of Italy.

The Constitution of 1948 was to be a powerful refutation of the fascist period. The memory of Benito Mussolini's dictatorship resulted in the weakening of executive powers and the strengthening of the legislative. However, the parliament and cabinet system were ill-equipped to function effectively in a country famous for its hot temper, where the people treat politics like a highly emotional game. One consequence of this was the weakness of Italian government. No control could be exerted by the president, as his prerogatives were mainly restricted to purely representative functions.

Throughout Europe, Italy was perceived as a country of chaos that lacked stability. The most notable example was the lack of stable ruling coalitions. Cabinets changed as if they were in a kaleidoscope, so that an average Italian government remained in office for no more than 10 months. Yet an incoming government was not usually much different from its predecessor, as it was composed of the same factions, and frequently shared the same ministers. Political games began to be the new reality, existing for their own sake. This resulted in a progressive alienation of politics and its severance from the society. Political practice in republican Italy strongly reinforced the political parties. They began to take primacy over state institutions – a phenomenon that has not developed, at least not to the same degree, anywhere else. One reason for this was the fact that no political formation obtained sufficient electoral support to govern independently. Even an alliance of two parties would not suffice to form a government. Governmental alliances had to encompass multiple players – four or five as a rule. In Italy, the decision about the shape of the government and both its programme and personal facet – which is of fundamental importance for democracy – was not made when it should have been, that is during the election, but during the post-election bickering between the elites of the leading parties. The vote, which was of crucial importance when it came to dealing with affairs of state, was in fact cast by party secretariats operating beyond civic control. This resulted in the hegemony of parties in Italian politics, in that the peculiar promotion of parties was achieved at the price of deforming democracy. Even prominent Italian academic books on constitutional law, which cannot be viewed as being frivolous, have always devoted much space to the question of partycracy (*partitocrazia*).[11] Partycracy, which

[11] See *Diritto costituzionale*, Edizioni Simone, Napoli 1992, p. 95.

manifested itself most fully in the Republic of Italy, was considered a degenerated democracy. Political parties, having appropriated the sovereign rights belonging to the nation, made sovereign decisions about the course and the future of the state, nominating the most senior positions in all institutions by the virtue of nomenclature arrangements. The phenomenon, to quote L. Elia, "of a party occupying the state"[12] became a highly negative political phenomenon specific to Italy. A. Manzella, in turn, spoke of "partycratic state."[13]

It was not wholly surprising, then, that Christian Democracy became the symbol of partycracy, as from 1945 to 1994 it formed the core of all the Italian cabinets. What might be viewed as a paradox, the accusation of partycracy, was levelled against the Christian Democrats, even by their allies. The Christian Democrats not only felt perfectly at ease in this party-dominating system, but who were also capable of extracting political benefits from this situation. The leader of the Italian Republican Party (*Partito Repubblicano Italiano* – PRI), Giorgio La Malfa recognised that "Christian Democracy became identified with the state," and added that it was "sufficient to think what the control of Christian Democracy over the life of the entire country – the banks, RAI [public TV and radio – M.B.], public institutions – to understand that the manner of voting in the elections depends on these power structures and on this unusually powerful nomenclature."[14] He was supported by the leader of the liberals (*Partito Liberale Italiano* – PLI), Renato Altissimo who claimed that "Christian Democracy, with the mere 30% of votes, possessed 90% of the power."[15]

Only on rare occasions did the Christian Democrats rule single-handedly as a minority government. Government alliances, which connected Christian Democrats to the parties of the so-called "constitutional arch" (*arco costituzionale*) – that is the republicans, liberals, social-democrats, and the strongest faction in this group, the socialists – were the rule. Because of the continuous changes at the top and frequent breakdowns in the cabinets, Italy became legendary for its lack of political alternatives. New governments, as has already been mentioned, were composed of virtually the same elements as their predecessors. The crystallisation of the governing political system proved to be a breeding ground for corruption, which eventually turned out to be the decisive factor behind the political change of the 1990s. Here one ought to pose a question about the reasons for this lack of political alternatives and the permanence of political elites, which was astonishing in a democratic system. The answer seems relatively easy: any potential change in Italy was blocked by what is frequently referred to as "the C factor," namely the presence of the Communist Party

[12] L. Elia, 'La peculiarità e l'evoluzione del sistema italiano riguardo ai partiti politici' in *Sindacato e sistema democratico*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1975, p. 178.

[13] A. Manzella, *Il parlamento*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1991, p. 58.

[14] Quoted in *Przegląd Międzynarodowy*, Polska Agencja Prasowa, Warszawa, 30 August 1991, *Wokół sondażu nt. "Włoskiej nomenklatury"*, p. 19.

[15] Ibid.

– the strongest communist party of the Western world. For many years the Party was believed to be working against the system, that is questioning the foundations of the state's constitution and calling for radical changes. Until 1989, which brought about a significant weakening of global communism, Italy, as G. La Malfa rightly noticed "was a front state."[16] In other words, it was the Western democracy most threatened by communism. "We had," continued La Malfa "a system with an opposition so radical that it could only be sentenced to remaining outside of the system."[17] This situation ensured that there could be no possibility of a left-wing opposition to the governing system. A rightist opposition was even less likely because the Italian right wing was represented by an organisation of fascist provenience, i.e. the Italian Social Movement – National Right Wing (*Movimento Sociale Italiano – Destra Nazionale* – MSI-DN).[18]

Thus the political stage of the country was dominated by the fundamental opposition of two huge parties, each of which represented approximately 30% of electoral votes: the perennially governing Christian Democrats and the Communist Party – always in opposition, because second one lastingly subjected to the operation of the specific *conventio ad excludendum*[19]. For nearly five decades major groups of the electorate engaged in negative political behaviour, consistently voting against various measures. Many of the votes cast for Christian Democrats did not necessarily reflect support for their programme, but were instead cast in opposition to communism. The situation in the Italian party system was referred to as an imperfect two-party system (*bipartitismo imperfetto*).[20] The essence of the imperfectness of the Italian two-party system was that the two big parties mentioned above did remained unchanged in government. The deadlock in the system of power and the lack of change in the state's ruling class brought about numerous negative phenomena, including the partycracy mentioned above, as well as corruption and the obscure connections between the politicians and the world of organised crime, i.e. the mafia.

Despite all this, one should remember that post-war Italy achieved major economic progress, becoming one of Europe's most powerful economies. Italy's standard of living improved greatly, mainly as a result of the impressive economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, generally referred to as the "economic miracle" (*miracolo economico*). The crisis in politics, a fairly permanent phenomenon, was in a way overcome and separated from the life of society and from economic activities which followed

[16] G. La Malfa, G. Turani, *Le ragioni di una svolta*, Sperling & Kupfer Editori, Milano 1992, p. 1.

[17] Ibid., p. 55.

[18] See P. Ignazi, *Il polo escluso. Profilo storico del Movimento Sociale Italiano*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1989 and M. Bankowicz, 'Faszyzm w życiu politycznym powojennych Włoch' in J. Končelík, B. Köpplová, I. Prázová, J. Vykoukal (eds.), *Rozvoj české společnosti v Evropské unii*, MatfyzPress, Praha 2004, Vol. 3, pp. 197-210.

[19] Cf. P. Scoppola, *La repubblica dei partiti. Evoluzione e crisi di un sistema politico 1945-1996*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1997, p. 425.

[20] This term was first used by G. Galli, who used it for the title of his book, *Il bipartitismo imperfetto. Comunisti e democristiani in Italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1966.

their own course. Giulio Andreotti, one of the leading politicians of post-war Italy, who served seven times as the Prime Minister, claimed that Italians found a method of governing in crisis, and as a consequence of this the phenomenon of "stable instability" appeared.[21] The situation in the country was perfectly portrayed by a title in the French press: the headline over a description of contemporary Italy went "Eppur si muove!" (*But it does move!*). In this context, the words attributed to Galileo received a new significance, meaning that despite all the limitations, crises, and trouble Italy does move forward.[22]

In 1989, Central and Eastern Europe became the stage of the famous "autumn of the nations," the result of which was the fall of the world communist system. Everything suggested that this would lead to certain processes and value changes within the PCI, but not deep enough for us meaningfully to talk about a fundamental turn. Only a few believed that such a radical political change would take place in Italy. Since 1956, Italian Communists had broken from Moscow, they rejected the principle of unity in the world's communist movement, and instead developed the idea of an "Italian path to socialism." This standpoint and at the same time the party's independence found their expression, for instance, in the PCI's support of the "Prague spring" of 1968 and its subsequent determined disapproval of the military intervention of the communist states in Czechoslovakia.[23] During the 1970s, under the leadership of Enrico Berlinguer, the PCI clearly chose the strategy of Euro-communism: an attempt to reconcile the traditional ideals of the communist movement and the requirements of parliamentary democracy and a free market economy. At that time Italian Communists were already openly criticising the so-called real socialism, acknowledging that the Soviet Union and other communist countries had perverted Marxism, in whose name those states imposed highly repressive dictatorships. This resulted in what P. Ginsborg, a British historian specialising in Italian affairs, has called the "atrophy of Italian communism."[24] Yet, the PCI – less and less communist in its programme and political line – retained its historical name.

Nevertheless, the 1989 collapse of communism, both in its capacity as a system of government and as an ideology, posed a certain challenge for Italian communists, as it forced them to look for a new identity in this new world. The view that the communist collar was more and more oppressive and restrictive for the party, and for that reason it should be done away with, began to gain ground within the party. In 1990, during an extraordinary congress of the PCI, a decision was reached to terminate the 69-year-long history of the party and to reject completely its Marxist

[21] G. Andreotti, *Governare con la crisi*, Rizzoli, Milano 1991, p. 421.

[22] See J. Zakrzewska, *Ustrój polityczny Republiki Włoskiej*, Warszawa 1986, p. 14.

[23] See P. Demartis, 'PCI e Cecoslovacchia: la forma e la sostanza', *Mondo Operaio*, Gennaio-Febbraio 1989, pp. 15-18.

[24] See P. Ginsborg, *L'Italia del tempo presente. Famiglia, società civile, Stato 1980-1996*, Einaudi, Torino 1998, pp. 293-309.

and Leninist heritage.[25] The PCI was replaced by the Democratic Party of the Left Wing (*Partito Democratico della Sinistra* – PDS), which defined itself as a democratic party working on the grounds of reformist socialism. The orthodox wing of the old Communist Party, which never came to terms with its dissolution and considered such a step to be "political treason," formed a group under the name of the Communist Refoundation Party (*Rifondazione Comunista* – RC) which later – a fact that is worth emphasising – managed to consistently secure parliamentary representation, though markedly smaller than that of the PDS.

Many observers of the Italian political stage argued that since the Italian communists were experiencing acute difficulties as a result of their attempt to change their identify, Christian Democracy would continue its hegemony within the state and would be able to dictate political conditions in Italy for decades to come. It was said that Italy would evolve from an "imperfect two-party system" to a system that possessed a single dominant part. Yet these forecasts never came to pass.

The wave of major corruption scandals in 1992-1993 led to a political "earthquake." The media almost daily publicised stories of corruption and fraud that involved leading representatives of the political class. For a period in 1992, the prosecution conducted inquiries into every third member of the parliament, including five party leaders, four former prime ministers, and many members of former governments. The parliamentary election of March 1994 wiped out nearly all the previous political establishment from the political stage. Changes of party names and symbols, e.g. in 1994 Christian Democrats transformed themselves into the Italian Popular Party (*Partito Popolare Italiano* – PPI) were to no avail; even the removal of the most disgraced politicians did little to revive the party's fortunes. The voters, disgusted with the enormity of the disclosed corruption, put their weight behind a number of rival parties, including Forza Italia (FI), a formation set up two months before the elections by the billionaire, Silvio Berlusconi. Those parties that had reputations for being against the system also gained increased support, like the Northern League (*Lega Nord* – LN) that propagated federalist slogans and did not exclude the possibility of the dissolution of the Italian state, and the National Alliance (*Alleanza Nazionale* – AN) based on the neo-fascist MSI-DN. The post-communists were the only party within the traditional system to survive politically, but this was only because they had not participated in government and were therefore safe from major scandals. Berlusconi achieved an unprecedented triumph within a state that possessed an established democratic regime. His party, which had existed for little more than two months, won the election with the highest share of votes (21%) and the largest number of MPs.[26]

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[25] See the documents of the 19th Congress of the PCI, *The Italian Communists*, January-March 1990, and especially the programme presentation of the then leader of the party, Achille Occhetto entitled *A new beginning: the constituent phase of a new political formation*, pp. 100-159.

[26] Interesting material on the establishment of Forza Italia and the campaign ran by the group before the elections of 1994 can be found in E. Poli in the book entitled *Forza Italia. Strutture, leadership e radicamento territoriale*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2001, pp. 43-71. See also: P. Ginsborg, *L'Italia del tempo presente…*, pp. 538-556.

The elections of 1994 are considered to be a turning point, in that they opened up a new period in the history of Italy. This was reflected in the terminology that was employed: it was said that the First Italian Republic was replaced by the Second Italian Republic. This, however, was an exaggeration and the facts scarcely support such an assertion. Although parties that had governed the country continually since the end of the Second World War were removed from the government, no significant constitutional changes were enacted, despite many attempts, and therefore the system remained fundamentally unchanged.

In the 1990s major cracks appeared in the construction of the Italian state and for the first time they could be clearly seen. The danger of the Balkanisation of Italy due to the increasing number of internal conflicts, and the increasingly pronounced opposition of individual parts of the state, began to loom large. This process was related primarily to the activity of the ever more influential Northern League, which joined the club of the most important participants in Italian politics. The League called in to question the integrity of the state as well as the justification and advisability of the Republic of Italy's continued existence in its present form.

The Northern League, as Umberto Venturini correctly remarked, is the "most controversial political party of Italy."[27] It was established in 1979, when the unknown would-be physician, Umberto Bossi, established the North-Western Union of Lombardy for Autonomy (in Italian – UNOLPA), which was soon transformed into the Lombard Autonomist League (*Lega Lombarda* – LL), which was eventually replaced by the Northern League in 1991.[28] Bossi's grouping started as an organisation of Lombard separatists. The more moderate ones spoke of the need to ensure the broad autonomy for Lombardy within a federalised Italy, while radicals openly talked about liquidating Italy and establishing an independent Lombardy. Bossi himself vacillated on this issue, and at different times included federalist or independence slogans into his programme. The League recognised as its patron Alberto da Guissano, a knight whose forces defeated the armies of Frederic Barbarossa at the Battle of Legnano in 1176. This ancient event was to be the source of *ethos* for the Lombards – a nation separate and clearly distinct from Italy. Later, the Celtic origin of the Lombards was strongly emphasised.[29] This was accompanied by the feeding of the antagonism between the North and the South. Nowadays, the League proclaimed, the Lombard nation is forced to defend its own history, culture and language, and its social and moral values in the hard struggle against aliens, including Italians, and especially those from the South. For that reason, the national identity of the Lombards had to be stirred up in order to develop among them a sense of community on the one hand, and a feeling of otherness – if not superiority – over aliens

[27] U. Venturini, 'A Biographical Profile of Three Emerging Leaders: Mario Segni – Giorgio La Malfa – Umberto Bossi', *Italian Journal. A Bi-Monthly Digest of Italian Affairs*, No. 2-3 (1992), p. 15.

[28] The genesis and operation of the Lombard Autonomist League are appropriately characterised by D. Vimercati in the book entitled *I Lombardi alla nuova crociata. Il "fenomeno Lega" dall'esordio al trionfo*, Mursia, Milano 1990.

[29] For more information, see G. Caldiron, *La destra plurale*, Manifestolibri, Roma 2001, pp. 62-63.

on the other. One of the League's manifestos said: "It does not matter how old you are, what you do, and what political tendency you follow. The only thing important is the fact that you are – that we are – Lombards."[30] Here we deal with a specific sacralisation of the Lombard nation; put simply, they believed themselves to be better than the others. This perception of hostility towards outsiders brought charges of racism against the League. In his analysis, L. Manconi referred to the League's activists as being the "entrepreneurs active in the field of intolerance."[31] Bossi realised that his faction was perceived as racist and populist. "They say," he wrote in his autobiography, "that I am closely related to Jean-Marie Le Pen, and that the League is the voice of the racist Lombardy."[32] He would, however, stalwartly oppose such a charge, claiming that he turned his attention to the rights of Lombardy and its people not for racist or populist reasons, but because he believed in federalism, for it was federalism that formed – he believed – the core of the League's programme. Moreover, Bossi disagreed with comparisons made between him and Mussolini. He argued that there were no similarities, notably because, unlike Mussolini who "marched on Rome," he would lead a "march from Rome."[33] His "march from Rome" was to be the symbol of the federalist and decentralist programme of the League.

The League has always been perceived as a group making reference to regional nationalism, criticising what they believed to be the centralised Italian state and its institutions, controlled by, to quote verbatim, "Roman parties."[34] It was not, however, only an anti-party and anti-institutional group, for it went further: it was an anti-system grouping, if not an anti-state one. It did postulate, as has been mentioned above, the liquidation of Italy by breaking the country into independent regions.

The League's radicalism reached its peak in mid-1990s. On 15th September 1996, in Venice, in the presence of 20,000 supporters, Bossi announced the independence of Padania: a new sovereign state which was to encompass northern and central Italy, namely: the Aosta Valley, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli – Venezia Giulia, Liguria, Lombardy, Marche, Piedmont, Tuscany, Trident – Upper Adige, Umbria, and Veneto. Neither the Padan State nor any other political construct of a similar character has ever existed. The name of Padania was devised by Bossi himself, as he believes that there exists a historical, cultural and socio-economical identity of the "people of the Po valley."[35] The Padanian Declaration of Independence was modelled on the 1776 American Declaration of Independence. "We, the nations of

[30] Quoted in I. Diamanti, *La Lega*, Donzelli Editore, Roma 1993, p. 56.

[31] L. Manconi, 'Imprenditori dell'intolleranza' in L. Balbo, L. Manconi, *I razzismi reali*, Feltinelli, Milano 1992, pp. 82-87.

[32] U. Bossi, D. Vimercati, *Vento dal Nord. La mia Lega, la mia vita*, Sperling & Kupfer Editori, Milano 1992, p. 143.

[33] B. Vimercati, 'La storia' in U. Bossi, B. Vimercati, *La Rivoluzione. La Lega: storie e idee*, Sperling & Kupfer Editori, Milano 1993, p. 109.

[34] See G. Statera, *Come votano gli italiani. Dal bipartitismo imperfetto alla crisi del sistema politico*, Sperling & Kupfer Editori, Milano 1993, p. 52.

[35] See B. Vespa, *La sfida*, Sperling & Kupfer Editori, Milano 1998, p. 254.

Padania," it reads "solemnly announce: Padania is a federalist, independent, and sovereign Republic."[36] After the declaration, the Italian flag went down the mast and was replaced with the green and white flag of Padania. Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, then the President of Italy, warned Bossi that although the Italian state guaranteed its citizens freedom of speech, it could not tolerate illegal acts. A criminal case against Bossi and other leaders of the league was considered, but was finally rejected as the support for independence of Padania turned out to be marginal (only 7% of Italian citizens declared that they supported the idea of an independent Padania). With the passage of time, the initiative now seems to have been a political peculiarity. After a few years, the Northern League underwent another political evolution, it adopted a more moderate agenda, and without officially repudiating the idea of an independent Padania, announced that it would now aim for the federalisation of Italy. Furthermore, over the League's political success came to an end, as its support decreased in the polls. The League's weakening position led to it becoming less dynamic and served to reduce the radicalism of its professed views. An expression of this moderate strategy was the League's participation in the Berlusconi's governmental alliance in 2001.

The League persistently maintained that the political system of Italy is based on the exploitation of the North by the South. The rich and industrious North produces the bulk of Italy's GNP, which to a large extent is wasted by the poor and lazy South. Why is it so? The League's answer is simple: because the state is governed by Southerners connected to the mafia.

By emphasising the disparities between the Italian North and the Italian South, the League touched upon a real problem. By exposing these differences, it could count on being understood and, therefore, that it would attract a great deal of support among the electorate in the north of the country where – having been influenced by the League's views – people began to consider seriously the idea of a divided Italy. There was a growing belief that if this did occur, then their standard of living would almost automatically greatly improve.

Research recently conducted in Italy proved that if the South became a separate country, it would be the poorest EU state in terms of *per capita* GDP. Unemployment in the region ranges from 30% to 50% and is also the highest in the entire EU. On the other hand, the North would stand a realistic chance of obtaining the title of being the EU's richest state. It is a fact that there is an economic gap between the two halves of the country; this fact undermines the reputation of the Italian state, which for decades either did not want or was simply unable to bridge this gap.

An Italian analyst, P. Chiantera-Stutte, has noted that one of the key reasons for the success of the Northern League has been the fact that during its entire 'life' the Italian state has never solved the so-called "national question."[37] This was clearly re-

[36] Quoted in M. Jędrysik, 'Narodziny Padanii', *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Warsaw), 16 September 1996.

[37] P. Chiantera-Stutte, 'Leadership, Ideology, and Anti-European Politics in the Italian Lega Nord' in D. Caramani, Y. Mény (eds.), *Challenges to Consensual Politics. Democracy, Identity, and Populist Protest in the Alpine Region*, P.I.E.-Peter Lang, Bruxelles et al. 2005, pp. 115-116.

flected in its inability to unite fully North and South, because the economic, social, cultural, and mental differences between these parts of the country are very pronounced. Indeed, it is almost amazing that they remain within the same state. This undoubtedly is the most serious shortcoming of Italian statehood.

To conclude, the ideology and operation of the Northern League reflect the basic tragedies of Italy, whose roots stretch back into the period of the country's fragmentation. For the League drew upon the spirit of separatism, which has always been on the peninsula, and which has always been hostile to the heritage of *Risorgimento*: the 19th century movement that promoted the restoration and unification of the country. That sort of separatism continues to exist and from time to time still makes its presence felt. In the 1990s a sufficient space opened up for separatism as a result of a marked crisis in Italian national identity. For centuries, Italy was divided, both politically and culturally. The unified Italian state came into being fairly recently in the latter half of the 19th century. At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the powerful impact of integration processes in Europe, globalisation and supra-national economic and financial institutions, as well as the influence of mass culture and the prevalence of a consumer lifestyle all served to undermine traditional myths and weaken national values. This process was especially visible in Italy, where the state's founding myth proved to be rather weak.

The example of the League kindled the imagination of other Italian separatists, who wanted to follow the path it had provided. Supporters of the restitution of the Republic of Venice turned up and hung their flags on the Doges' Palace. In Rome, the supporters of the restitution of the Papal States, with the Pope being their sovereign, began to organise themselves. Voices that professed admiration for the Kingdom of Sicily and the Bourbon Dynasty were also heard, while Sardinia was found to possess many people who advocated the island's independence. None of these movements, however, became popular; they have never been more than political curiosities, not even venturing into the margins of true politics. Yet politics, and especially during periods of crises and turning points, provides numerous examples of curiosities suddenly becoming rather more significant, and then influencing the course of history.

Some time ago, Pietro Scoppola remarked that "there is a paradox in the history of the republic: normally, the sense of citizenship and the group identity related to that are reinforced by a democratic system; the implementation of civil, political, and social rights consolidates the common sense and perception of belonging. Yet in our country, after fifty years of democracy, national identity has entered into a crisis."[38] The various drawbacks of Italian democracy, such as the weakness lack of efficiency of state institutions, the failure to bridge the division between the North and the South, partycracy, clientelism, and corruption turned out to be highly corrosive for the national conscience, as they alienated the state from society and strengthened the conviction that it is an alien structure. The democratic and republican post-war Italian state wasted its opportunity to play the role of finally and irrevers-

[38] P. Scoppola, *La repubblica dei partiti…*, p. 528.

ibly reinforcing the nation's identity. Gian Enrico Rusconi went even further when he presented his radical diagnosis, when he warned that the "nation may cease to exist."[39] These opinions were formed at the height of the political crisis of the 1990s, a crisis that shook the foundations of the state. It was feared that many people might reject Italian national identity for a local or European identity. While the Northern League and other political initiatives of a similar character promoted the first trend, the die-hard Eurocentrists suggested the latter. The most pessimistic predictions did not come true. There has been no *finis Italiae*, which does not, however, mean that Italian national identity emerged unscathed from the acute difficulties of coping both with the separatism and with the demise of the party system.

At present, Italians still must struggle with the question of whether they indeed are a nation, and if so, whether they still should be one. Although, when asked, a majority give a positive answer to this question, this includes a large number of people who first define themselves by regional or local affiliation, and only after that by national affiliation. Italian regional variations are much greater than in any other European country.[40] Ernesto Galli della Loggia noticed another factor here: "the weak Italian national awareness, i.e. the insufficient awareness of the fact that Italians are to be a nation and the rare situations when they do manifest their being as a nation, is a central and highly significant fact for the contemporary Italian identity."[41] If this is correct, then the task of building the Italian nation that Cavour bestowed to the Italian state has indeed not yet been accomplished.

[39] G.E. Rusconi, *Se cessiamo di essere una nazione*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1993, p. 7.

[40] Cf. S. Vertone (ed.), *La cultura degli italiani*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1994, p. 93 and S. Sechi (ed.), *Deconstructing Italy: Italy in the Nineties*, University of California, Berkeley 1995, p. 3.

[41] E. Galli della Loggia, *L'identità italiana*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1998, p. 157.

Professor Marek BANKOWICZ, director of the Department of Modern Political Systems at the Institute of Political Science and International Relations of the Jagiellonian University; Deputy Dean of the Faculty of International and Political Studies of the Jagiellonian University. Recently he has published several books: *Zlikwidowane państwo. Ze studiów nad polityką Czechosłowacji* [Liquidation of the State. Studies on the Politics of Czechoslovakia], Kraków 2003; *Historia polityczna świata XX wieku* [Political History of the XX Century World], Kraków 2004; *System polityczny Singapuru* [Political System of Singapore], Kraków 2005; *Demokracja. Zasady, procedury, instytucje* [Democracy. Principles, Procedures, Institutions], Kraków 2006; *Dyktatury i tyranie. Szkice o niedemokratycznej władzy* [Dictatorships and Tyrannies. Essays on Nondemocratical Power], with W. Kozub-Ciembroniewicz, Kraków 2007; *Przywódcy polityczni współczesnego świata. Mężowie stanu, demokraci i tyrani* [Political Leaders of Contemporary World. Statesmen, Democrats and Tyrants], Kraków 2007; *Zamach stanu. Studium teoretyczne* [Coup d'État. A Theoretical Study], Kraków 2009.